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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DUSHANBE 000786

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SUBJECT: PERSIAN POWER: TAJIKISTAN'S DEVELOPING TIES WITH IRAN

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Tajikistan has characterized its ties with Iran as purely economic, but growing political, military and diplomatic relations indicate that more than investment and trade is bringing the two countries closer together. In the last eighteen months, Tajik President Rahmon and Iranian President Ahmadinejad have made trips to each other's capitals and signed a raft of agreements and declarations ranging from education, science and culture to inter-parliamentary and defense cooperation.

¶2. (C) Rahmon's public rhetoric has always emphasized the shared linguistic and cultural bonds, but his private rhetoric lately has begun to include an element of political apology for his neighbor and cultural kin. Iranian assistance has also trickled into impoverished rural areas, building schools and mosques in places where the government has provided little development. Secular Tajiks may not be comfortable with Iranian religious dictatorship, and parts of Rahmon's government still resent the quiet support Iran gave to the Islamic-oriented opposition in the Tajik civil war ten years ago. But although friendship with a country that supports religion-based insurrections in neighboring states is a dangerous game for Tajikistan, neither Rahmon nor Tajikistan can afford to say no to infrastructure development and investment. In the short run, both countries stand to gain from closer relations: Tajikistan needs the money, and Iran needs the friend. END SUMMARY.

Persian Shuttle Diplomacy

¶3. (C) President Rahmon's May 7-10 visit to Iran was the latest in a series of meetings for the Persian-speaking leaders. In January 2006, Rahmon went to Tehran, and in July 2006, Ahmadinejad and Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited Dushanbe for a tripartite meeting. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs characterized the May trip as a "working level visit" on ongoing investments (ref b), the Iranian news agencies used the opportunity to report that Tajikistan would "support Iran's call" to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization. Rahmon called on the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and proposed a Tajik-Iranian business forum, as well as a regional railroad project linking Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran. While the visit broke little new ground, it further cemented a relationship expanding into many spheres.

Economics

¶4. (C) Tajikistan increasingly looks to Iran for economic assistance, both as a trading partner and as an investor in key infrastructure projects. According to official statistics, in 2006, Tajikistan imported more than \$34 million from Iran, mainly eggs, cooking oils, chocolate, other consumer goods and aluminum oxide, while it exported \$76 million, primarily cotton and aluminum.

¶5. (C) In May, Iran announced intentions to invest in a Tajik vehicle production facility for Samand cars and construct a cement plant with a million ton capacity. In addition, the Tajik aluminum company Talco will invest in several of Iran's seaports, providing Talco new outlets to the world market. Talco Chairman SherAli Kabirov told PolEcon Chief with great pride that his company intended to invest \$66 million to rebuild a coke refinery in Iran -- Tajikistan's first ever foreign investment. An Iranian company has begun construction of Dushanbe's tallest building, a 27-story "Tower of Peace" (reftel C).

¶6. (C) Iran is financing and building the Anzob tunnel (\$39 million, and from all accounts an engineering disaster months behind schedule); the 220 megawatt hydropower station Sangtuda-II (\$220 million, and two years behind construction), and a tunnel at Chormazak (\$55 million). The Tajik government

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touts its "open door policy" as a guiding principle and welcomes all investors, but Iran, along with China and Russia, has been one of the few countries to sink major resources into Tajikistan's risky business environment.

Politics

¶7. (C) In response to every U.S. demarche regarding Iran's violation of U.N. resolutions and Iran's nuclear program, Ministry of Foreign Affairs interlocutors are quick to tell EmbOffs that Tajikistan opposes all forms of nuclear development in the region. However, they are equally quick to point out that Tajikistan will not openly oppose Iran on the issue, for fear of losing the much-needed infrastructure investment. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs official recently admitted to EmbOff that Tajikistan could not object to Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, should Iran pursue membership.

¶8. (C) However, during the May 23 visit of NATO Special Representative for Central Asia Robert Simmons, Rahmon made what Simmons characterized as "almost an apology" for Iran's civilian nuclear program and offered an explanation for Ahmadinejad's approach to the United Nations.

¶9. (C) Tajik officials across various ministries have proposed Tajikistan as a natural go-between for Iran and the United States to solve problems. Since his re-election in November, Rahmon has been busy traveling around the Muslim world, not just to Iran, to project an image of Tajikistan as a regional player and to seek financing for infrastructure projects. Iran views Tajikistan as a little brother in the relationship and would likely dismiss an intermediary role for Tajikistan in dealing with the United States or the United Nations on its nuclear program. In turn, many Tajiks in the government still remember Iran's assistance to the opposition during the Civil War and fear any sort of religious resurgence in Tajikistan, which may limit the degree of engagement with Iran on political issues.

Education and Culture

¶10. (C) Both Iran and Tajikistan have played up the linguistic and cultural ties between their countries despite the fact that Iran is primarily Shia and Tajikistan Sunni. Iran has increased its engagement in Tajikistan's educational sphere, planning an educational complex, providing up to 100 university slots for Tajik students to study in Iran, and offering Persian-language textbooks in Arabic and Cyrillic scripts. (Note: Persian-Farsi, written with Arabic script, and Persian-Tajiki, written with Cyrillic, are mutually intelligible. End Note.) Due to the different alphabets, Tajik students and workers still turn more to Russia than Iran, but this could shift if Iran increases the number of scholarships and offers more instruction in Farsi in Dushanbe. Many Tajiki language publications are consciously incorporating more Farsi and Arabic words.

¶11. (C) Iran maintains a cultural center in Dushanbe as well as a private secondary school that a few Tajik elites attend. Iran is an important source of linguistically understandable pop culture as well. A hugely popular Swedish-based Iranian pop star triggered a highly unusual public demonstration by disappointed youths when he postponed his concert last year. Iranian music and television are available through satellite television, and Iranian hits are all over Tajikistan's airwaves.

Defense

¶12. (C) The Tajiks and Iranians have danced around military cooperation, but activities and assistance have yet to produce any significant partnership. In general, the Iranians are disappointed in the level of military cooperation and tend to dismiss the Tajiks' characterization of their military relations as cooperation. The Russian-influenced Tajik Ministry of Defense remains wary of the influence of political Islam and therefore reluctant to fully engage the Iranian military.

¶13. (C) An Iranian Ministry of Defense delegation visited
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Tajikistan April 29-May 2 and although the two sides signed a document, the visit was more political than substantive in nature. In addition to a dose of anti-U.S. rhetoric, the Iranians offered minor technical assistance including uniforms, small arms ammunition and radio repair. Press reports mentioned that Iran has provided "over 6 million dollars" in military assistance to Tajikistan over the last 10 years. This is a drop in the bucket compared to what other interested parties, including Russia, China and the United States, provide.

¶14. (C) The delegation cancelled a meeting with Tajik Foreign Minister Zarifi, a former Ambassador to the United States at the last minute, raising some speculation as to the real level of cooperation and goal of the mission. The Iranian defense minister may have considered Zarifi too associated with the United States and therefore unworthy of meeting with the Iranian defense delegation. On the whole, the visit indicated an Iranian preoccupation with U.S intentions in Tajikistan and further abroad.

Religion and grassroots development

¶15. (C) Much to the discomfort of Tajikistan's secular post-Soviet cadre, Iran has quietly been making an impact in rural areas, by donating money for mosques and schools. The mosques are able to offer some short-term assistance for families needing food or assistance when the men are in Russia working. We have anecdotal evidence that Iran funnels the money through local Islamic Renaissance Party chapters, which then use

the money to build mosques and some schools. Despite growing government efforts to control the construction and activities of these mosques in rural areas, more and more they are serving as community centers and providing social services.

¶16. (C) Nevertheless, recent Presidential moves banning the wearing of Iranian-style headscarves in schools and government offices provide evidence that secularism is still an important government policy. The combination of heightened fears of religious extremism, government and local attitudes towards Islamic missionaries and Iran's overtures in the mid-late 1990s would make Tajikistan a difficult environment for Iranian religious influence to take root.

What does this all mean?

¶17. (C) The trajectory appears to be upwards for Tajikistan and Iran. The relationship is likely growing beyond the economic, which could mean a stronger Iranian influence on President Rahmon, particularly if Iran tried to leverage its substantial investments for political support on the world stage. Adding Iran's well known anti-American rhetoric to the already dominant Russian propaganda means that the U.S. message could have a more limited impact. The Tajik government is unlikely to embrace, or welcome, Iran's religious policy, but may try to ignore that aspect of Iran (as it sometimes does with U.S. messages on democracy and civil society) by concentrating on other areas of cooperation.

¶18. (C) Economically, the United States cannot compete with Iran's infrastructure investment, but we can use feasibility studies to define projects that might attract U.S. or other foreign investors. We will continue to encourage a better business climate through assistance programs that aim for long-term stability and transparency for small and medium enterprises.

¶19. (C) Culturally, the growing influence of Iran makes bringing the Peace Corps to Tajikistan all the more essential. A volunteer teaching English in the same town as an Iranian-supported mosque would at the very least give Tajik citizens with limited access to outside media some exposure to our culture and values, while providing a desperately needed (and frequently requested) service.

¶20. (C) Politically, we will repeat our message to the Tajiks that supporting a country in flagrant contravention of UN resolutions and international opinion is a bad move, despite the economic incentives. President Rahmon is a pragmatist, who

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carefully weighs his options but seems susceptible to strong rhetoric and international diplomacy. A high-level visit to Tajikistan in August for the opening of the U.S.-funded bridge at Nizhniy Pyanj, just weeks before the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit where Iran could make a play for full membership, will provide the ideal opportunity to open a dialogue with Rahmon on Iran.

JACOBSON